

It's said that humans can choose their own time to die. I think dogs can too.

Living at Highcroft, our farm in Dutchess County, we have had many dogs through the years. They have all been special in their own ways, but one really stands out: our yellow Labrador retriever, Lord Boomerang. Boomer was anything but your typical, happy-go-lucky Lab, though he certainly looked the part – a block-headed, full-chested Labrador with a thick, rudder-like tail, pink nose, and broad feet for paddling. But his brow was deeply furrowed and his brown eyes were full of questions. *What are we doing and why? Am I going to like it? I probably won't. In fact I know I won't.*

Boomer was a heavy thinker, a serious leader of our pack who stood sentinel here at Highcroft, ruling the roost as a not-so-benevolent dictator. He greeted visitors with a deep, throaty growl and was known to grab a visitor's hand as a warning against entry without permission. He distrusted strangers, particularly men with beards; he scared little children and bristled at rivals, but he adored us – especially my husband Doug – and he loved to hunt pheasant. The sight of a shotgun sent him into a tailspin, and he was so talented in the field that a top trainer once offered to buy him. A manly dog, he lusted after Rosebud, our Corgi, and he tried to seduce her long after he could do anything about it. He also loved Christmas presents, football games, American cheese, swimming, horse manure and road trips. He hated baths, going to the vet, and walking on a leash, and he loathed coyotes, one of whom he bravely confronted on a walk last autumn, crow hopping toward her with short, angry barks. She backed off with a stern warning from me, but I let Boomer think it was all his doing.

An outlier among Labs, Boomer was commanding and noble, a lover who could also be fierce. But mostly he was proud. Snatching a steak off the counter and begging at the dinner table were beneath him, though he was not shy about sticking his nose where it didn't belong when weekend houseguests arrived. He had a vulnerable side, too. The salad spinner scared him to death, as did a summer thunderstorm, when he would pad over to the bed and scratch insistently until we made room for him. He cringed behind our legs at the vet's office, hoping we would shield him from the pokes and prods, all of which he detested.

He was also mightily independent. Unless he was bird hunting, he had a bad case of selective hearing: He would stubbornly trot off when we called him, a habit he adapted as a puppy when we lost him in the cornfield one summer night. He had a signature trick to avoid bath time: He would walk into the woods and sit down directly behind a tree, so he was invisible. He would then peer around the trunk to monitor our efforts to locate him. He could sit there silently for hours, never moving a muscle. And he did. Boomer always did things his own way.

Some say that Labs act well up until the day they die. Boomer didn't fit that mold either. At 14, he began to grow some large, benign tumors – so many that we joked he was more tumor than dog. He developed an old man's hack and began to bring up the rear on our outings. His hind

legs weakened, and he was disgusted that he needed help to go out to relieve himself. And then, one day, he could barely walk. The vet diagnosed a spinal cord issue, so we started aggressive steroid treatment. While that bought us some time, cancer emerged in his lungs, making it hard for him to breath.

Though he was stoic through it all, Boomer's quality of life was terrible, so we made arrangements to have him euthanized, a decision we debated at the kitchen table for more than a week before reluctantly setting a time at the vet's office. Once again, Boomer had his own ideas. In the wee hours of the appointed day, I rose to check on him and found him half sitting up on his favorite bed, panting. I opened the mudroom door to let in some cool air and knelt down, my hands slowly stroking his chest. His tail thumped, his breathing softened, and after a moment, he quietly slipped away.

What woke me from my sleep? Was it a cry? Or had he silently commanded us to come to his side, unwilling to depart until we did? I do not know, but it was no coincidence. I am at peace knowing that I was with him at the end, and I take great comfort in the fact that in death, as in life, Lord Boomerang of Highcroft had once again picked his own line.

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